

Infections and hospitalizations skyrocket as Canadian governments facilitate rampant Omicron spread

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Canada's federal government reported 322,362 active COVID-19 cases across the country as of January 4, up by around 100,000 in just four days. Underscoring the rapidity with which the Omicron variant is spreading, the current number of infected people amounts to close to 15 percent of the 2.3 million positive cases detected since the pandemic began two years ago.

This catastrophic situation, which is already producing a dramatic rise in hospitalizations and deaths, is the product of the criminal policies pursued by the ruling elite. The federal and provincial governments have openly embraced the fascistic policy of "herd immunity"—i.e., the claim that the pandemic can be ended by allowing enough people to get infected and build up collective immunity. Governments have cut quarantine periods to ensure big business has a ready supply of workers and restricted COVID-19 testing to conceal the scale of mass infection from the public.

In Ontario, Health Minister Christine Elliott reported Tuesday that 1,290 people are currently receiving hospital care for COVID-19, up by a staggering 163 percent compared to the 491 receiving treatment a week ago. Of these, 266 patients are currently in intensive care, up from 187 a week earlier.

The Ontario Science Advisory Table estimates that only one in five infections is being detected by the authorities. Based on Elliott's announcement of 11,352 new infections yesterday, that would mean that the true figure of daily infections is close to 60,000 in Ontario alone. At a press conference Monday, Premier Doug Ford declared that Ontario's hospitals could be left short by "thousands" of beds in a matter of weeks. Under pressure from widespread public outrage over his government's mishandling of the pandemic and the mounting Omicron catastrophe, Ford was compelled to announce a two-week delay to the reopening of schools for in-person learning. Delays of at least a week to school reopenings have also been announced in British Columbia, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec.

Omicron is taking a particularly devastating toll on children. On Christmas Day, 12 children aged 10 or under were admitted to hospital in Quebec, a single-day record since the beginning of the pandemic. As of early January, 149 children aged nine or under had been admitted to hospital since the beginning of Quebec's fourth wave of infections. This includes a two-month-old baby who died of COVID-19 at Montreal's Sainte-Justine hospital on December 16.

Even though the Omicron wave is only in its early stages, hospitals are already reporting being overwhelmed by the rapid increase in patients. William Osler Health System, which oversees Brampton Civic and Etobicoke General hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area, declared a code orange yesterday for the first time during the pandemic. Code orange is declared when demand for patient care outstrips a hospital's capacity.

In Quebec, more than 440 staff members at Quebec City's Québec-Université Laval hospital have been infected with COVID-19, with another 400 isolating due to possible exposure. The hospital will cut medical appointments and operating room activities by half as of today.

This unfolding health care catastrophe is not primarily the product of the extremely infectious Omicron variant, but the ruling elite's criminal response to its emergence. A little over three months ago, the Trudeau Liberal government returned to office after September's federal election proclaiming that the pandemic was entering its "end game." Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland announced the gutting of what little remained of financial support for workers, claiming that the provision of a mere C\$300 per week to workers in a lockdown was the "final pivot" of the government's pandemic response. Freeland insisted that the benefit would only be paid to workers facing 14 days of consecutive lockdown ordered by an employer or provincial government, before subsequently relenting and allowing workers who lost their jobs due to the imposition of capacity

limits to access the benefit.

In October, Ford declared his “reopening” roadmap for Ontario, which included the elimination of all public health measures, including mask wearing, by March 2022.

Following the designation by the World Health Organization of Omicron as a variant of concern in late November, Trudeau waited almost three weeks before making a public statement to the population on his government’s response. No serious measures were taken to contain the more infectious variant, which can evade the immunity provided by vaccines. The let-it-rip strategy was endorsed by all parliamentary parties, including the Conservatives, New Democrats, and Bloc Quebecois.

After voting for an extension to the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), a slush fund for corporations that has seen the government pay them almost C\$100 billion since the pandemic began, and to cut financial support to workers to just C\$300 per week, the House of Commons voted unanimously to take a six-week Christmas break.

A report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives released Tuesday revealed that the CEWS helped Canada’s top 100 CEOs reach one of their best years for annual compensation in 2020, with average earnings of C\$10.9 million. Thirty-five of the companies, or more than one third, examined in the study received payments under the wage subsidy scheme.

The Liberal government’s indifference to Omicron’s spread has encouraged the far-right advocates of “herd immunity” to double down on their murderous strategy. Both Ontario and Quebec have cut the isolation period from ten to five days, following a decision by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC’s move has no basis whatsoever in public health, but was rather a direct response to the pleas of airline executives to help guarantee their bumper profits during the holiday season amid mass staff absences.

Meanwhile, Ontario has restricted PCR testing to those individuals deemed “high risk,” meaning that the true extent of virus transmission is unknown.

The callous indifference to human life that pervades governments and their public health officials across Canada was summed up in comments by British Columbia’s provincial health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry. A reviled figure due to her refusal to acknowledge that COVID-19 is transmitted through fine aerosols which linger in the air, Henry enthused that BC’s highest numbers of daily infections since the pandemic began was a positive development, a “new game” paving the way to an endemic state. “The way the virus is changing with Omicron, that is leading us to that place sooner,” she claimed. “The type of illness it’s causing, with most of us being protected through

vaccination, means that we are going to get to that place.”

This rehash of the constant propaganda from the corporate-controlled media about Omicron being a “friendly mutant” producing “mild” symptoms is nothing short of sociopathic. It contemptuously dismisses the experience of the virus’s deadly evolution to date, which has been worsened due to the pursuit of the policy of mass infection. The emergence of the more infectious Omicron was made possible because ruling elites internationally gave the Delta variant free rein to spread. Henry’s prescriptions will produce a similar catastrophe by encouraging the emergence of potentially more-infectious and more-virulent strains.

The “herd immunity” advocates could not care less for the more than 30,300 Canadians who have already lost their lives, and thousands more who will follow in the months to come if governments have their way. They are likewise indifferent to the plight of hundreds of thousands crippled by Long COVID. According to Alberta Health Services, some 68,200 people in the province have contracted or will develop Long COVID. Given that Alberta’s 4 million inhabitants account for just over 10 percent of the Canadian population, it is likely that hundreds of thousands of people across the country suffer from Long COVID.

“My COVID just didn’t go away,” Lisa Lauzon, a long-distance runner who contracted COVID-19 in April 2021, told CTV News. “I had to relearn how to breathe. One of the biggest learning curves is accepting being able to work within your energy envelope.”

The alternative to the health and social crisis produced by the ruling elite’s policies is the fight for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19. Workers must demand the immediate shutdown of all nonessential businesses with full compensation for all workers affected. A comprehensive program of testing, contact tracing, the isolation of infected people, the provision of high-quality PPE, and mass vaccination must be implemented until community transmission is reduced to zero. These policies, which mean a direct challenge to the prioritization of corporate profits over human lives, can only be enforced through a mass movement led by the working class.



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